

The Art of Sighing

by Shoshanna Katzman, L.Ac., M.S.



Sighing is defined as the emission of a long, deep, audible breath that expresses sadness, relief, tiredness or another similar feeling. And in a literary context, sighing is a deep yearning for someone or something that was lost, unattainable or distant. As such, many people have found themselves sighing more than ever in this new COVID reality for a multitude of reasons. For many, this comes from losing a life as it once was, with no assurance things will ever be the same. This leads many to a deep sense of existential fear, often accompanied by high levels of anxiety and depression.

Conventional medical wisdom tells us that such excessive sighing can be debilitating to the physical body. Sighing also has a deleterious impact on one's energetic system when looking through the lens of Chinese medicine. This stems from negativity suppressing the flow of qi (vital energy) throughout the body. Within this context, it is likened to an expression of excessive anger, which according to Law of the Five Elements, has an adverse effect on energetics of the liver organ system. Furthermore, flow of qi directly impacts the quantity and quality of blood flow and vice versa.

When a state of qi and blood deficiency continues over an extended period of time it can lead to extreme fatigue, physical pain and improper body function. It has further poten-

tial to negatively impact others living with this person – as having to listen to this perpetual sighing becomes quite a downer. Sighing is oftentimes something people just do without thinking, without being aware of the consequences for themselves and others. Therefore, it is important to recognize this as an issue along with being proactive to get to the root cause and work on oneself to reduce its occurrence.

Conventional medicine also states that continual sighing can be a sign of an underlying health condition such as high anxiety, depression, fearfulness or a lung condition. According to Chinese medicine, these symptoms involve the energetics of the heart, lung and kidney organ systems. This becomes a catch-22 situation because deficiency of qi within these vital organs in turn leads to excessive sighing.

On the other hand, scientific research has discovered that the act of sighing preserves health of the lungs by inflating alveoli, which are delicate balloon-like sacs where oxygen enters and carbon dioxide leaves the bloodstream. In 2016, joint research done at UCLA and Stanford pinpointed the origin of sighing as two tiny clusters of neurons in the brainstem that transform a normal breath into a sigh. According to Mark Krasno, PhD, professor of biochemistry at Stanford, their findings shed light on the network of cells in the brain stem that generate breathing rhythm. And Jack Feldman, PhD, who is a professor of neurobiology at UCLA states: "One of the holy grails in neuroscience is figuring out how the brain controls behavior. Our finding gives us insight into mechanisms that may underlie much more complex behaviors." Feldman further notes: "If you don't sigh every five minutes or so, the alveoli will slowly collapse, causing lung failure."



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The key here is to transform the act of sighing into a positive sound, thereby counteracting the deleterious impact that negative sighing has on the physical body and energetic system. This may require the help of a psychotherapist or social worker to work through negative feelings that are harbored within. This turns perpetual sighing into a health-provoking experience for oneself and those in their midst.

Therefore, it is important to work toward acknowledging and working through feelings underlying the need to constantly emit a negative sounding sigh. Engage in enjoyable activities whenever possible, and of course, get out and exercise to help release built up negative thoughts and feelings. Taking a course or finding a book about how to take deeper breaths is another suitable approach. Strengthening the lung system through integrating deep breaths with movement is at the core of exercise systems such as yoga, qigong and tai chi. Look for healthy ways to transform the act of sighing into a positive release filled with hope and inner resolve – doing your very best to cope with life as it is for now.

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